

**"Broad-Shouldered" Rhetoric:
The Trump Era and the Peculiar Contempt for Words**

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A year after the Nazi rise to power, the Austrian Jewish writer, Hermann Broch, published an essay titled, "The Spirit in an Unspiritual Age." In it, he writes: "Humanity today has been overtaken by a peculiar contempt for words, a contempt that is almost revulsion... never before...has the world so candidly and openly admitted that words mean nothing and, moreover, that any attempt at mutual understanding and agreement is not even worth the effort. Never before has it been resigned so openly to thinking that the only means it could, or should, use, is power...".¹

When I first stumbled upon this essay I regarded it as a strange historical document. Its strangeness had to do with its use of language, which appears hyperbolic until one considers that it immediately preceded—and in that sense warned us against—the creeping murderousness of the Nazi regime. In that context, it appears as a flailing attempt to describe an unprecedented moment in history, one in which modernity was fulfilling its most terrifying promises.

Broch continues, "Over and over again, humanity loses its language...time and again humanity is thrown back to the muteness of its dim origins... This mute silence weighs heavily on a world that has lost language and spirit, for it has put its faith in power...".² Here, Broch strains to find language adequate to convey the drama of what he's witnessing. Using the grand, universalizing language of "humanity" to suggest a realm of values, the tautology of "mute silence" to concretize what might otherwise remain too abstract, and the mythologizing character of "dim origins" to remind of us of

the possibility of a return to dust, Broch paints a picture of a bellicose world, whose techniques of power ironically include banishing language.

What did he really mean by a failure of language? One thing he meant was that people no longer understood each other. His metaphor was Babel. “Not the voices of dialogue and discourse, but muddled voices, as if from a broken loudspeaker, each shouting down and drowning out the others, a Babel of languages and ideas ignoring each other...”.³

Babel demonstrates that the best way for a sovereign to maintain power is to sow division and confusion, to render our language meaningless, to shut down our attempts to organize. Broch continues: “The easy confidence that people could persuade one another by means of words and language has been radically lost... Each one knows that the other speaks a different language, inhabits a different value-system... The merchant cannot persuade the soldier, nor the soldier the merchant, and they understand each other only to the extent that each concedes the other’s right to use whatever means he has at his disposal, to employ his own values ruthlessly....”.⁴

Written in the context of fascism, it describes the state of our culture wars today with eerie accuracy. I cite the anecdotal evidence of my own forays into the underbelly of social media. On a page of Trump supporters, I responded to the bill filed by Tennessee Senator Bill Ketron (HB0668) granting immunity to drivers who injure protestors blocking traffic, arguing that there was something immoral and even un-American about mowing down protestors. Here are some representative responses: “I wanna make my bumper out of a chunk of railroad rail.” “Run their dumb asses over, they’re most likely a drain on society anyway.” Curious about my blood-thirsty interlocutors, I scrolled through their posts and happened upon the following attack on the media: “He [Trump] can bash them [the press] until they prove they are not lying scum. The populace has weighed and measured them and found them wanton and guilty as charged. I hope he continues to bash them for their many crimes.”⁵

It’s interesting that the word this writer uses to describe the press (whether a slip or not) is “wanton,” implicitly comparing its shameless reporting of (so-called) falsehoods to sexual immodesty in women. By linking his critique of free speech to a fantasy about the dangers of libidinous, out-of-control women, and by hoping aloud that

Trump will continue to punish them, the writer reveals both an insecurity vis-à-vis the power of feminized (wanton) discourse and a hostility to women that's not incidental to the attack on democratic institutions, but is situated at its very core. Two further posts seemed to confirm this. The following predates Trump's victory: "Dear Government: you are not a pimp and America sure ain't your whore." The author of this post, a soldier, a self-proclaimed Deplorable, is in a fury over his emasculation, his imagined position as whore to an empowered black man. It is the precursor to the post that appeared after the election, a banner reading: Donald Trump: Finally Someone with Balls. These posts position Obama, the unnamed object of derision here, as both too "masculine" and too "feminine," too much of a pimp, and not enough of a man. In the first case, Obama's manliness, constructed as violent and controlling, emasculates the exploited American man positioned as his whore. In the second case, the writer attacks Obama for not having balls. I'd suggest that Obama is feminized here precisely because of his verbal eloquence, the considered, artful quality of his language. If it's true that the Trumpian imagination casts eloquence as feminine, then Obama's power of persuasion ironically castrates him, providing a defense for those men unable to identify with his linguistic prowess. Where, in Hermann Broch's world, the Jews were Europe's polyglots, and, as Sander Gilman points out, routinely both feminized and sexualized,⁶ now language itself (the wanton press, the castrated orator) is marked as feminine and is therefore disposable. When Mike Pence suggested that the Syrian conflict required "broad-shouldered leadership,"⁷ he was both arguing against female leadership at the highest levels and elevating brute force over diplomacy, further diminishing the value of words.

One of the most blatant examples of the attack on language occurred during the second presidential debate, when Donald Trump was confronted about the 2005 tape that exposed him bragging about sexual assault. Clinton claimed that the tape revealed Trump's true character, which was reinforced by countless examples of his hostility to women. She proceeded to name them. When she then went on to articulate her own contrasting values, Trump's method for disempowering a woman who could talk circles around him was to say: "It's just words, Folks. Just Words."⁸ With this simple phrase, Trump diminished the importance of Clinton's skill set, implicitly denying that attributes of language (like clarity, logic, and the ability to hierarchize and distinguish) correlate to

the sort of strength that counts for governing, and suggesting that his own words (to Billy Bush, for example) need not be understood literally, freeing him of responsibility from their effects.

This crisis of language affects both the way power speaks to the people and the way the people are able to speak back. The right pretends, however, that while the country itself has been sick, language has never been more robust, more reduced to its (pseudo-masculine) essence. “I know words,” Trump says. “I have the best words.”⁹ According to experts, they are pitched at a fourth grade level,¹⁰ all the better to demonstrate the contempt for words. Here are some of Trump’s strategies for “broad-shouldered” rhetoric:

1. The Myth of Authenticity. He “Tells it like it is. The truth hurts.” Against the background of packaged, conventional politics, Trumpian off-the-cuff spontaneity FEELS authentic, even though what he spontaneously produces are lies. He’s believed both for having the courage to deliver bad news and for selectively denying the bad news that would be too inconvenient to address. His stance against political correctness contributes to the appearance of authenticity, releasing people from their social inhibitions, allowing them to express hostility, fear, or mistrust of others without shame. It develops a sense of community among those who feel silenced by their super-egos. By claiming not to be PC, code for strategic falsification, Trump creates a myth of himself as a courageous truth-sayer.
2. Projection and Reduction: assigning Trumpian traits to the enemy. Examples are plentiful: Lyin’ Ted, Little Marco, Crooked Hillary, Nasty Woman, Fascist Protestors. Trump expels his own worst character traits, purifying himself as he attaches them to enemies, attacking them for his own flaws. And by synecdochic reduction, he turns them into cartoon characters.
3. Symbolic Uses of Language Trump the Literal: When an unsubstantiated statement is exposed as a lie, his staff suggests that we should take his words symbolically rather than literally, insisting that words cannot pin him down. On the one hand, he is plain-spoken, pretending to say what he means. On the other hand, he uses language symbolically, explicitly refusing to say what he means.

4. The Unpretentious Language of “the People”: This poses as a rejection of “elitism.” Trump’s reduced linguistic arsenal makes him appear trustworthy to those who mistrust the educated elite, trafficking in anti-intellectualism. He speaks their language, enabling identification. How else can we explain how the forgotten working class imagines itself represented by a billionaire in a gilded tower? But he lubricates their imagination by talking like they talk, by putting a Big Mac on a china plate, allowing for the identificatory logic of porn. For a moment, they imagine that they are sharing in his experience, jet-setting around the country, sleeping on featherbeds, and grabbing all the women they like. He is their onscreen actor, their proxy, and though they know they don’t have a six pack or the stamina of a twenty year old, for a moment they imagine that that perfect ten actress is accessible to them.

These are just a few of the techniques being used to chip away at the potency of words. Our ability to respond effectively is hampered by the sheer volume of offenses that are no longer disqualifying. From his mocking of a disabled reporter to his demeaning of a gold star family, the litany of offenses becomes overly familiar, functioning like clichés, like words defanged. We are sputtering. The words we have found are inadequate for representing the dangers of elevating and rewarding brutality, of handing power to those whose only expertise is the exploitation of the weak. To call this “alarming” risks understating the gravity of our situation, while dramatic claims and gestures about teetering on the brink of tyranny risk being dismissed as hysterics. For Hermann Broch, a writer’s job was to represent his era. And by Hitler’s reign, when reality was unrecognizable, realism was no longer adequate to the task. Like many of the modernists, Broch became wildly experimental in an attempt to reflect a distorted world.

I’m reminded of a scene in Kafka’s *The Trial* in which K, the protagonist, notices a painting in his lawyer’s house. It depicts a man in judge’s robes seated on a throne. Rather than posing in dignity, the man looks as if he’s about to “spring up at any moment in a violent and perhaps wrathful outburst.”¹¹ We learn that the man who looks like a judge isn’t a judge at all. He’s actually a man “so small he’s almost tiny” and rather than sitting on a throne, he’s really on a kitchen stool covered in horsehair blanket.¹²

The question is: can we tell the difference between throne and stool, and if so, will we continue to notice this difference?

I wanted to end by opening up a conversation about how we might *use* language to confront the crisis of language. How do we respond effectively in this altered landscape? The truth is, I'm not sure. My suspicion is that we might experiment with reversing Trumpian strategies, rejecting his broad-shouldered rhetoric. That would mean beating them at the game of authenticity, chipping away at the cartoon-like character of their representations, disrupting the logic of their identifications, exposing the disparity between themselves and those who claim to represent them. It would mean reappropriating language that's been weaponized, claiming it as a point of pride. It would mean we'd have to resist shouting, shaming, demonizing, and above all, humiliating them, so that we don't become them. And finally, I would suggest that we take a cue from the Russian Formalists.¹³ Defamiliarize. Make strange. Impede the process of perception so that we continue to notice that this new vision is not our country. If we manage all that, and words become sharp again, we will still need to answer the question of balancing between acts of just aggression and the need to form alliances with some of those we've counted as our enemies.

¹ See Broch, 41-2.

² Broch, 42.

³ Broch, 42.

⁴ Broch, 41-2.

⁵ Although these comments from cyberspace have disappeared from my grasp, their resulting status as disputed facts makes them particularly appropriate to a context in which the very value of the verifiable has been placed in question.

⁶ According to Gilman, circumcision was a sign of the feminization of Jewish men, 35.

⁷ For an overview of Pence's attachment to this image, see Ross.

⁸ A link to the entire debate and transcript can be found at *The Washington Post*. See Blake.

⁹ For an example of one of the many journalists who cited this speech with amused horror, see Jones.

¹⁰ See Westneat.

¹¹ See Kafka, 105.

¹² See Kafka, 106.

¹³ For Shklovsky, "defamiliarization" was a technique whose purpose was aesthetic rather than political. But because the technique is used to make one notice a world that's no longer seen, it could be usefully employed to combat the normalization of outrageous gestures and policies in the political sphere. See Shklovsky.

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